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HUMAN GEOGRAPHY—A REVIEW*

By EDWARD YEOMANS

Nothing is so congenial to children as to go back into the mysteries of origins, back as far as the molten earth and back of that to the nebula. I know that because I have tried it. Children themselves have come out of geography in a very real sense, and they want to know where they come from. They have a right to know, and the result of that knowledge means tremendous things for them in the way of reverence and sanity and steadiness under strain. Back of their mother is the race of mothers, and back of the race of mothers is Mother Earth. Viewed in this light geography is a magical subject to children, not prose but poetry, not statistics but a picture of life itself. It is one of the native diets of childhood deprived of which a child cannot grow in grace and symmetry.

But, when they are given their first geography book and have their first lesson, somehow a door seems to slam in their faces, and they get a cold welcome to their Alma Mater. They are handed something about Arctic Circles, Tropics of Cancer and of Capricorn, the equator, temperate and torrid zones, parallels of latitude; and afterwards there is much to remember—hard to remember because so perfectly arbitrary and prosaic—about boundaries, about cities, about the “main products,” and about the “main rivers,” a great inert informational mass that will never be digested.

There you see most of the school children of this nation today studying the lesson in geography for tomorrow, with expressionless faces as a task analogous to arithmetic, and confronted by teachers who learned it in the same way. How can you expect anything from them?

What is the function of geography in a child's education? you ask, and you are quite convinced by now, no doubt, that here is another of those “new educational” cranks dilating his theory, blowing it up with the heat of his enthusiasm as toy balloons are blown. And it is just as fragile, you think—just as collapsible in the great currents of men's affairs, as it floats away into space.

THE FUNCTION OF GEOGRAPHY IN A CHILD'S LIFE

Dare I stop to inquire what, after all, *are* the great currents of men's affairs and whether we are justified in believing that children ought, if possible, to avoid confusion in a question so important as that and not get the

*J. Russell Smith: Human Geography, Book I: Peoples and Countries. 369 pp.; maps, diagrs., ill., index, John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, etc., 1921. 10 x 7½ inches.

impression that they are local and purely personal and more or less trivial? For, before you can successfully answer the question about the function of geography in a child's life, you must actually have a pretty well established point of view about life in general—its main currents at any rate, the depth of them, the volume, the direction of flow.

Before you are qualified to teach anything at all you must have a background of thought and of experience, the larger area the better, which drains right through you and irrigates your class, otherwise you can fertilize nothing.

ORDER AND BEAUTY

One of the characteristics, then, of that mysterious Gulf Stream in the ocean of man's history is this, that quality is more important than quantity; and another characteristic is the persistence of order and therefore of beauty, which things, applied to geography, mean that the crude, the formless, the chaotic, are always molded by irresistible forces into the restrained, the disciplined, the symmetrical—the fit to survive, the beautiful and therefore the useful. "Out of the strong cometh forth sweetness."

Four hundred years before Christ the end of all teaching and of all experience was stated, unconsciously, by the wisest man of that time; and you will be hard put to it to find a better statement. Socrates, coming one day out of a grove where he had had one of those conversational afternoons in which he so delighted and excelled, made this prayer as a token of his obligation: "O Pan—and whatever other deities may inhabit this place—help me that I may become beautiful inwardly and that all my outer goods may prosper my inward soul."¹

This is the supreme function of geography in a child's life—that he may, by means of it, be helped to start those processes which will make him beautiful inwardly and save him from that submergence in wordly goods which would suffocate his spirit.

I might have some hesitation in saying that that was the function of geography rather than of some other subject if it were not for the fact that geography includes almost every other subject. You can not bottle up geography as easily as you can many other subjects. It has a ferment in it—human life—and it has a tendency to blow out corks and spread itself profusely over things, over everything. In order to bottle it you have to take the fizz out of it, and that's just what the old-style teachers did and do—and there it is, all by itself, not a bubble in it and with a very flat taste, of no value as a heart stimulant, or a brain stimulant, or an imagination stimulant. You might better pour it into the sink.

Of course it comes back to the question always of the teacher, and the teacher question comes back to society in general, and society in general has never felt the spell of geography very much and seems to be content with the standard teacher and book.

¹ See Quiller Couch's wonderful book, "The Art of Reading."

A GOOD BOOK

Teachers of anything are rare, and therefore teachers of geography. And because they are so rare it is doubly important that there should be better books. For you can distribute a good book better than you can distribute a good teacher; and, besides, with a good book children can compensate somewhat for a poor teacher.

So I am going to take this occasion to discriminate between what I consider a poor geography and a good one. The poor geography is the kind my boys have been studying—that is enough to say—and with which I have been compelled nightly to help them through by reading it to them because they couldn't seem to read it to themselves and remember much about it. I had to dramatize it as well as I could and annotate it and enlarge on it and declaim on it and galvanize it into something that would register on those indifferent receivers. The land itself, however lovely or majestic, however filled with sunlight or starlight, heat or cold, vegetation or bare rocks or ice, seemed dull; and the people who lived in it, who drove dog teams or locomotives, camels or horses or elephants, who lived in tents or mountains and plains or apartments in cities, seemed dull too—people who never ate, who never talked, who never sang or shouted, who never showed any passion or fear or courage or nobility or depravity. In a word, it was a geography without *emotion*.

EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHY BASED ON FACT

But this emotional geography, you may say, is not advisable as a steady diet, even if it could be maintained; but it is nevertheless true that it is the only kind boys and girls will assimilate. For one intellectual vibration you can start by colorless statements of fact there are ten started by an appeal to emotion *based on fact*.

If I say the earth is a sphere, flattened at the poles, 8,000 miles in diameter and 25,000 miles in circumference, rotating on its axis once in 24 hours and moving around the sun once in 365 days, three-fourths water and one-fourth land—I get a respectful hearing.

But when I go on to say that this means that we are traveling at the rate of 190 miles a second and at the same time spinning at the rate of 1,000 miles an hour; that all these exceedingly heavy continents and limitless seas bent around this ball have been whirling this way through black and frigid space for hundreds of millions of years; that these two dead things, turning so long on the spit before the fire of the sun, eventually cooked up men, women, and children of all sorts, red, yellow, black, and white, who do the strangest things in their various compartments where geography has them on exhibition today—then I get into the focal area of those minds.

So I go on to tell the children that inorganic, or what we call physical geography, is a stunning fine thing, a colossal thing, and is filled with an awful and immortal beauty, frequently with a deadly menace. But the

significance of it all lies in what it has produced through the long process which began with seaweed and by way of bugs, fishes, birds, and beasts of the field and forest has got at last down to children in schools, children in tents, children in snow houses and in mud houses and in shacks in the jungle, whose parents work at all manner of the most interesting things in order to get enough to eat and to wear, get money for tools, weapons, car fares, and automobiles.

The sun comes up and they all get up, put on their funny clothes, sometimes none at all, and begin doing the things geography compels them to do. The sun goes down and they lie down and rest, still creatures of the old sun and still creatures of the old geography.

It is the pupils' great privilege and distinction to be able, because they have been given these astonishing telescopic minds and microscopic minds, to look back over the long and arduous path their ancestors have come and also to hold up the spinning earth and see among the mountains and valleys, across the deserts and the seas, these little contemporaries of theirs, walking, running, working, playing, riding, hunting, eating queer food, talking queer words, fighting, singing, hating, loving, dying.

In other words we propose to teach human geography, a subject filled with action and with emotion but based squarely upon that immeasurably ancient physical geography which gives the final reason for and the final limit to—everything.

THE CHILD TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION

And here Dr. Smith's book comes in. When you look into this book you are tremendously encouraged. It is a good book because it is a wise book. It takes children into consideration first and facts into consideration second. It realizes that children, that childlike minds, get their best apprehension of fact through stories, through play, through occupation. For the purpose of teaching ethics you can't surpass the fables of Aesop or the parables of Christ. For the purpose of teaching geography you can't do better than take Dr. Smith's way and tell stories and make pictures. It is the same method applied to a different thing. Dr. Smith does not teach geography through his book for the sake of geography as much as for the sake of teaching; that is, he uses geography as an instrument in order to teach life, which is the way in which every subject should be used in the teaching of children. What children need is a very broad and simple comprehension and apprehension of natural processes, as we have said before, of discipline, of order, of proportion, of inter-relation, and of beauty—of all of which they are a very intimate part. And especially they need to feel the necessity for good will and co-operation in the human family as the only thing which can possibly save it from complete disaster, as the earth becomes more and more crowded. I do not say that Dr. Smith teaches ethics in his book; it would be a mistake if he did. But the by-products of a good textbook are its most important output, and "the

statement of the case" as one finds it there is such that there is far more hope for a valuable by-product than I have discovered in any other geography designed for children.

COLLATERAL READING AND MUSIC

While this article was never intended to be more than an appreciation of Dr. Smith's book, I might have made one or two pertinent suggestions. One would have been the necessity for a list of books for children's collateral reading, very carefully selected books for the use of both teachers and pupils, which contain whole stories or chapters or pages of prose or of poetry to intensify the pictures of places and of people by dramatizing them. But I find this has been arranged for in a separate manual published to accompany the geography. And also music! For how can you leave music out of geography? If you are studying Russia how desirable it would be to sing a Russian song—perhaps the "Volga Boat Song" at morning exercise—and the folk songs of other nations when those nations are being considered.

And also would it not be a salutary thing if children were made aware of the fact that our civilization, this modern Western thing which roars in our ears, is not a thing to be too proud of. It is a transitional thing and has terrible defects, to which they should not contribute. Some of their admiration should be spared for other civilizations, for different kinds of people. Who, for instance, are these amazing people called "Tungus"? Listen to this description of them in the January (1921) number of the *Geographical Review*:

All observers speak in enthusiastic language of the temperament and moral qualities of the Tunguses. . . . "Full of animation . . . always cheerful even in the deepest misery, holding themselves and others in like respect, of gentle manners and poetic speech, obliging without servility, unaffectedly proud, scorning falsehood, and indifferent to suffering and death—the Tunguses are unquestionably an heroic people."

Consider what such people can contribute to us and also whether it would be kind for us to contribute anything to them except our profound admiration and respect.

MAP MAKING AND HISTORY

I do not think there is quite enough emphasis placed upon the making of maps. There should be plenty of map making, both drawings and relief maps of "plasticene," and these maps should be considered, in a sense, works of art. Making maps should be a most important feature of any work in geography.

And of course the history teaching must always go along with the geography. These two things can never be separated and be intelligible. Either the history classes must make the maps or the geography classes must make them.

I have talked about a considerable number of things, perhaps, which Dr. Smith could not very well include in his book. I have let the subject of geography overflow the vessel it has to be carried about in—namely, the book. But I do not think I have in any way exaggerated the function of the teacher who uses the book and who catches the implications in it and the by-products which it can produce in proper hands.

THE MOST EDUCATIONAL THING IN THE SCHOOL

But, you say, there is not time for all this; why, at this rate geography would take half the school hours, or at any rate so much more than can be allowed from the very serious matters of arithmetic, grammar, English, French, etc. But when geography is correctly taught nothing will be more reasonable than to let it take the time because it will then be the most educational thing in the school. It is the most educational thing in nature, so why shouldn't it be in school? Simply because school has nothing much to do with nature—isn't that the answer?